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ABSTRACT

Speech, language, and composition professionals should take a leadership role in working toward a national public policy on language. The declining rates of literacy and educational achievement in AfroAmerican communities serve as evidence that such a policy is needed. However, the policy would govern language teaching and language use throughout the United States and would ultimately be beneficial to all communities. Such a policy would (1) reinforce the need for and teaching of standard American English, (2) promote the legitimacy of mother tongue languages and dialects, and (3) promote the acquisition of one or more foreign languages, preferably those spoken in the third world, because of their widespread use in this hemisphere. Steps that speech, language, and composition professionals can take in making such a policy a reality include aligning with political progressives in demanding restoration of budget cuts from education and other domestic programs, conducting language awareness campaigns needed to accompany the movement for a language policy, and working with the public schools to develop uniform standards and guidelines for linguistic performance. (DF)

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TOWARD A NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY ON LANGUAGE

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> Darlene tryin to teach me how to talk....Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down. You sure this worth it? I ast. She say, yeah, bring me a bunch of books. White-folks all over them, talking bout apples and dogs. What I care bout dogs I think...But I let Darlene worry on. Sometimes I think bout the apples and the dogs, sometimes I don't. Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind.
>
> --Celie, in The Color Purple (Walker, 1982)

With Celie's profound philosophical statement as backdrop, I am here issuing a challenge to speech, language and composition professionals to take the leadership role in working toward a national public policy on language. The immediate impetus for this call to action comes from the precipitously declining rates of literacy and educational achievement in AfroAmerican communities. For example, school drop-out rates are running about 65% in Chicago and 66.5% in Detroit, both urban school districts with overwhelmingly large Black student populations. However, the policy would govern language teaching and language use throughout the U.S. and ultimately would be beneficial to all communities. Thus, as has always been the case throughout U.S. history, whenever Blacks have pioneered social change, the result has been change and betterment throughout the American social reality. Recall, for instance, how the movement for Black Power ushered in calls for Brown Power, Red Power, Female Power, Student Power, Counterculture Power, Grey Power, and on and on--the Black struggle in the 1960's and 1970's opened up the economic and social structure for everybody.

....It is time to call the children in and teach them the lessons of the Blood....

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In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed a policy resolution, "The Students' Right to Their Own Language." I am honored to have been a part of the movement behind this resolution and later a member of the committee that wrote the expanded document accompanying the resolution (Butler, 1974). Our goal at that time was the promotion of such a policy throughout the profession of speech, language and composition scholars and educators. Unfortunately, that goal was not realized.

In 1977, I wrote that "ultimately teachers should struggle for a national public policy on language which would reassert the legitimacy of languages other than English, and American dialects other than standard" (Smitherman, 1977). Unfortunately, that goal was not realized.

In 1979, in King v. Ann Arbor, (Smitherman, 1981), Judge Charles C. Joiner issued a ruling reaffirming the legitimacy of Black English and the existence of its African sub-stratum and mandated that the Ann Arbor School District "take into account" Black English in the educational process of teaching Black children to "read in the standard English of the school, the commercial world, the arts, science, and professions" (Joiner, 1979). Thus, the King decision laid the basis for instituting a language policy for the Black community which would have had far-reaching implications for other communities. Unfortunately, that goal was not realized.

Although linguist Wayne Williams applauded my work and that of my colleagues in King, nonetheless, he argued that from a policy standpoint, the "Black English Case" may have been "premature" (Williams, 1982).

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However, I say to my fellow linguist, Brother Williams, that recent movements against linguistic minorities and the alarming school drop-out rate among the Black English-speaking underclass serve to remind us that the motion of history does not wait for political maturity.

Because we failed to act, now we must re-act. The aborted movement, spear-headed by the Conference on College Composition and Communication, to establish a national public policy on language would have addressed the mother tongue and language crises of all Americans--not just Blacks, Browns, Reds. The "Students' Right to Their Own Language," after all, reaffirmed the language rights of White Appalachian students, female students, Arab students, Polish students, White counter culture students, middle class students--in short, all students. For you see, no one escapes the tentacles of the self-appointed guardians and preservers of the national tongue (as spoken by themselves, I remind you). Witness, for example, the castigation of President Reagan when he said in his 1985 Inaugural Address, "If not us, who?" meaning, "If we do not make the hard decision, then who will?" (in which case, according to the long arm of the linguistic law, Reagan should have said, "If not we, who?"). In his New York Times language column, William Safire defended Reagan's right to his own language and took the President's detractors to task for insisting on such formal and "laughably stilted" usage (Safire, 1985). While the powerful, such as Reagan and others of his ilk, don't need linguistic sanctuary, the less powerful among us do. Thus a policy affirming the mother tongue language and dialect of ALL would have the effect of protecting the many from the linguistic imperialism of the few.

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All that is required for oppression to take hold is for good and well-meaning folk to do nothing. A language leadership vacuum has been created by the absence of national policy action from the professions and from political progressives. Into that vacuum has stepped reactionary and counter-progressive forces and movements. An illustrative case is "U.S. English." Some may dismiss this movement as the folly of an erring and aging self-hating Japanese semanticist. But that would be folly, for Hayakawa's campaign to amend the U.S. Constitution to make English the official language has succeeded in creating a burgeoning, highly effective and increasingly mass movement, a linguistic corrolary to the reactionary mood of conservatism reemerging across America. U.S. English is a national, well-financed organization, headquartered in Washington, D.C., which distributes a newsletter-journal, called Update. The Constitutional amendment that Hayakawa introduced into the U.S. Senate is currently being refined in a Senate committee which has done a significant amount of work on the proposed amendment already. Undoubtedly, U.S. English is primarily responsible for the proposal in California to overturn the tradition of printing election ballots in languages other than English. Such a proposal, if successful, would, of course, effectively disenfranchise large numbers of Spanish-speaking voters who are on the verge of becoming the dominant population in that State. Moreover, a movement like U.S. English provides yet another justification for cut-backs in Federal funding for the language-based educational programs for Blacks and other minorities struggling against functional illiteracy in school districts across this country. ....It is time to call the children in and teach them the lessons of the Blood....

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I am proposing that speech, language and composition professionals take up the unfinished business of the Committee on the Students' Right to Their Own Language, bring to fruition the implications of the King decision, and move quickly to counteract those reactionary sociolinguistic forces that would take us back to where some folk aint never left from. In calling for a national public policy on language, I take as theoretical framework the policy and planning models of Fishman (1972, 1980); LePage (1964); Bamgbose (1976); and Alleyne (1982). I shall use the terminology proposed by Fishman, the "language to wider communication," to refer to standard American English.

I propose a three-prong policy-- a 360° Trinity that constitutes an inseparable whole.

1) REINFORCE THE NEED FOR AND TEACHING OF THE LANGUAGE OF WIDER COMMUNICATION

The teaching of the language of wider communication has never been an issue (though I for one have erroneously been accused of rejecting its teaching). It has never been an issue, if and when it has been promoted as an integral part of a policy which includes recognition, use and acceptance of the native tongue.

Among speech, language and composition professionals, there is plenty of evidence that this has not been the case. For example, in our analysis of the essays of Black students from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Smitherman and Wright, 1983), we found significant correlations between the frequency of Black English and the rater's score, i.e., the more Black English, the lower the score. This correlation existed even in the body of essays in which raters were instructed to look only at rhetorical features, that is, to use primary trait scoring to assess how

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well the student writer had mastered the rhetorical modality under evaluation. Yet, many of the essays rated high were deplorably devoid of content, meaning and message, and further, the frequency of Black English was generally quite low--generally less than 20% Black English forms in any given linguistic category. Quite apart from the distribution of Black English in the essays, the writers experienced difficulty in coping with the demands of the assignment and writing towards the topic. For example, some students, in very edited American English syntax, would shift topic and focus right in the middle of an essay.

It must be stressed, then, that emphasis on the language of wider communication is toward the use of language as power; not mere "correctness," but the use of language to "make the impossible possible."

The language of wider communication is the language of literacy and technology, as well as the medium in which even the historical experiences and lessons of the Blood have been captured. Thus there is no question, nor, has there ever been, any question about the need for linguistic competence in this language. If today's speakers of non-mainstream languages and dialects are rejecting the teaching of standard English, if indeed, as Labov (1985) has suggested from his recent Philadelphia study, Black English is diverging from the language of wider communication, particularly among the Black underclass, it may be, in large measure, because educational institutions have never seriously accepted the mother tongue of the speech community. They've paid lip service to it, but they have not really accepted it. As Baldwin said, in his New York Times essay, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?", published two weeks after the King decision:

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> Now, no one can eat his cake, and have it too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more whipped than it is...It is not the black child's language that is in question; it is not his language that is despised; it is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.
>
> (Baldwin, 1979)

....It is time to call the children in and teach them the lessons of the Blood....

2) REINFORCE AND REAFFIRM THE LEGITIMACY OF NON-MAINSTREAM LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS AND PROMOTE MOTHER TONGUE INSTRUCTION AS A CO-EQUAL LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION ALONG WITH THE LANGUAGE OF WIDER COMMUNICATION.

The mother tongue language or dialect, of course, will vary according to the speech community. The point is that the indigenous language is the authentic voice of the speech community, and, as such, can establish the firm foundation upon which to build and expand the learner's linguistic repertoire. What Williams termed the "language conscious hypothesis" (Williams, 1982) has been shown to have a great deal of validity. In Williams' own research in the Seattle, Washington Black community, he demonstrated that Blacks who were conscious of their own language as a legitimate system were more receptive to learning the language of wider communication. As Bamgbose and other non-Western scholars have taught us, the mother tongue may be the only "passport to literacy" for the great majority of Third World schoolchildren. Certainly this appears to be the case for speakers of Black American English. For example, Pearson's work (1985) indicated that Blacks more fluent in Black speech acts, such as

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sounding and the Dozens, tended to be more fluent in the figurative, literary forms of the language of wider communication. Similarly, Simpkins and Holt's (1976) research with the Bridge materials demonstrated the feasibility and success of using Black English as a bridge to understanding and reading the language of wider communication in that some of the students in their experimental research program advanced as much as two years in reading level after one semester's exposure to the "bridge approach."

Finally, reaffirming the legitimacy of non-mainstream languages and dialects is critical if we are to bridge the developing divide and class tensions between the "have's" and "have-not's" in Black and minority communities and between those minorities and Whites.

3) PROMOTE THE ACQUISITION OF ONE OR MORE FOREIGN LANGUAGES, PREFERABLY A LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY PERSONS IN THE THIRD WORLD, SUCH AS SPANISH, BECAUSE OF ITS WIDESPREAD USE IN THIS HEMISPHERE.

The educational benefits to be derived from foreign language study have to do with sharpening critical thinking and heightening verbal skills. In times past, one was not considered truly educated unless he/she commanded a foreign language. The excruciating and embarrassing narrowness of the American populace in language matters is illustrated in the following joke:

What do you call a person who speaks three languages?

Answer: Trilingual.

What do you call a person who speaks two languages?

Answer: Bilingual.

What do you call a person who speaks one language?

Answer: An American.

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Most importantly, it is imperative that Americans--of what-ver color, race or sex-- be enlightened about world cultures; sensitivity through language is one way to achieve such enlightenment. Contemporary history is rife with the sordid remains of narrow provincialism emanating from a world superpower (e.g., the Viet Nam War). Our students, the citizens of the future, must be capable of understanding and hopefully of carrying on dialogue with non-Western peoples--the majority population in today's world.

There are several pragmatic moves necessary to make the policy outlined here a workable reality.

First, speech, language and composition professionals must work on the political front, in whatever way they can, to insure that, for instance, jobs and services are available for all, and especially for those we are teaching in our ebony and ivory towers. Acquisition of the language of wider communication, as Fishman tells us, must provide entree to power and resources, or there is little reason for indigenous populations to adopt it. Further, as Alleyne cautions us, we should try to profit from the tragic history of several newly-independent countries who have undergone linguistic and cultural transformation but who have not achieved modernization of the means of production or economic self-sufficiency--in short, they are still poor. And thus, in many Third and First World countries, the masses are rejecting technology and literacy campaigns.

Similar circumstances prevail in this country. For instance, in Black communities, intuition and logic suggest--if Labov's methodology, which some have labelled flawed, does not--that Black underclass communities are becoming speech communities whose language is increasingly

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diverging from the language of wider communication, as spoken by both Whites and Blacks. Of what benefit, one may well ask, is the language of wider communication, to a community in which, for example, 75% of its youth, from 16-24 years of age, are unemployed--and unemployable, without some kind of massive economic intervention? Given the poverty and class powerlessness of such a community, linguistic differences are easily predictable.

To insure rewards from language and literacy for America's working and UNWORKING classes, speech, language and composition professionals should align with political progressives in demanding the restoration of budget cuts from education and other domestic programs and in opposing the military build-up and its gross and offensive budget. In general, then, we as professionals should take an active role in the political affairs of the country.

Secondly, we should work with other professions and organizations to promote the call for a language policy and to garner the political support for it in the public domain. Groups like foreign language teachers' associations, psychologists' associations, Children's Defense Fund and others all have a stake in a national public policy on language.

As a third step, speech, language and composition professionals are the ideal group to conduct the language awareness campaigns needed to accompany the movement for a language policy. These campaigns would be geared toward combatting the myths about language use.

Campaigns would be conducted through newspapers, television and radio programs,

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magazines, and in other popular media, in community forums, churches, and throughout the general public domain. The objective would be to combat the myths and misconceptions about both non-mainstream languages and the language of wider communication. Language standards do change, and attitudes about language change also. While Safire's approval of Reagan's "If not us, who?" is a dramatic example, it is only one of many such changes in attitudes about usage. In the case of Black English, for example, Linn (1982) has suggested that attitudes toward Black English are more positive than a decade ago. Intelligent speculation suggests that this may be the legacy of the Black Pride Movement of the 1960's and 1970's which ushered in the widespread adoption of language, dance, music, and other cultural forms from the Black speech community. We should capitalize on this healthy transformation of American language standards and extend it further.

Finally, we should work with the public schools to develop uniform standards and guidelines for linguistic performance. This kind of institutional collaboration is vital not only to the promotion of a language policy but also for the general education of our students. At least two states are currently involved in this kind of educational collaboration--California through its focus on the educational underachievement of the State's linguistic minorities; Ohio through its Urban Initiatives Action Program for Language Education spearheaded by Central State University. Speech, language and composition professionals should all work collectively from preschool through graduate school on matters of language, literacy and standards of effective and successful uses of language. A vivid illustration of the need for this kind of educational

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cooperation is presented in a recent Georgia court case. Professor Jan Kemp filed suit against the University of Georgia after she was fired for protesting the University's lowering of academic standards for its athletes and wealthy donors' sons. Reacting to the court ruling in Kemp's favor, John Thompson, basketball superstar Patrick Ewing's former coach at Georgetown, put it best:

> Of course there are things wrong with athletics...but if you want to look at the real scandal, look at the entire educational system...It wasn't a coach who passed these kids from grades one through six when he wasn't able to read...What about all these kids who can't read who AREN'T playing basketball and football?
>
> (Wilbon, 1986)

To summarize, the language policy proposed here has three inextricable parts: 1) reinforce the language of wider communication; 2) promote and extend the legitimacy of mother tongue languages and dialects; and 3) promote the acquisition of one or more foreign languages, preferably those spoken in the Third World. Such a policy is not only concomitant with the emerging pedagogy that language is the foundationstone of education, this kind of policy is also a basis for participation and leadership in world affairs.

....It is time to call the children in and teach them the lessons of the Blood....

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